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Practical Theology and Pierre-André Liégé, written by Nicholas Bradbury

with a foreword by Timothy Radcliffe OP (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 263 pp. ISBN 978-1-472-418-708 (hbk). £65.00.

A Dominican who taught at the Institut Catholique in Paris, Pierre André-Liégré (1921–79) made a forceful impression on his Francophone contemporaries. In the English speaking world, however, he is virtually unknown. This book seeks to change that, and in the process to present the resources of later twentieth century practical theology from France and Quebec, which stem at least in part from his work, to a wider audience. Born and raised in the Bourgogne, Liégé entered the novitiate at Amiens aged 17, then twelve months later moved to the Saulchoir in Paris. Apart from a year in Tübingen, he remained there until 1951, when he took up his post at the Institut. Deeply committed to educational chaplaincy, as well as to the Scouting movement, Liégé exercised his pastoral ministry by day and continued his copious academic writing by night. The picture that emerges is of a man passionately committed to his people and his work, always seeking to relate the Church to the modern world. Liégé attended the Second Vatican Council as a theological consultant to two bishops and was involved in editing some of the conciliar texts, so was able to promote his ideas and see many of them gain formal acceptance.

Bradbury frames Liégé's pastoral theology as a quadrilateral comprising the Word of God speaking to humans in their freedom, faith as a relationship with God, theology informed by philosophy, and the life and mission of the Church. Particularly noteworthy is his defence of a revised form of catechesis suited to new times, which he rooted in a dialogue between priest and people, the act of faith of the whole person, an attunement to the mystical dimension of what is taught, and the love of God. Liégé sought to situate theology and church teaching as much in the world as in the Church, while nevertheless insisting on their dogmatic foundation. This endeavour was surely timely and found some success, and Bradbury performs a valuable service by distilling the content of a large quantity of untranslated writings.

Nevertheless, in places more seems to be attributed to Liégé than a deeper reading of his historical context might justify. The Roman Catholic Church in France in the period 1800–1950 is presented as theologically archaic, hostile to the secular world, and saddled with a formulaic approach to pastoral care. However, the moral casuistry of Alphonsus Liguori, which spread from Italy as early as the 1830s, challenged the pessimistic anthropology of Jansenism more than a century before Liégé, and was a method capable of delivering sensitive responses in concrete situations. For instance, the approach to contraception that clergy were encouraged to take was considerably more nuanced than that advocated well over a century later in *Humanae vitae*. Moreover, Alphonsine casuistry prepared the way for Thomist theological anthropology, which, by recognizing an aspect of human nature oriented to the divine, as well as an aspect capable of pursuing the natural ends proper to all humans, was able to address both the ecclesial context and the secular world.

In chapter 7, Bradbury applies Liégé's teaching to a fictitious English parish, suggesting its potential to transform local church life. He has several gripes about the Church of England, in which he is a priest, including its neglect of catechetical teaching, the preference of its congregations for tradition over change, and its tendency to dispense comfort rather than challenge. Liégé's model is presented as providing the solutions to problems such as these, including firmly grounded catechesis, frequent house-groups as the basis of the local church, and lay pastoral visiting as the backbone of its ministry. However, in Britain a sizeable number of churches already have these, with catechesis in particular having grown through programmes such as Alpha, Christianity Explored and Emmaus. Interestingly, the impetus for them has come out of the Evangelical wing of the Church, which has, via its ad hoc networks, a degree of dogmatic consensus analogous to that formally defined in the magisterial teaching of Roman Catholicism. In any case, Liégé is presented in places as offering solutions to problems that have in reality already been addressed without his help.

British practical theology also comes in for justified critique for its excessive reliance on experience at the expense of proper dogmatic, doctrinal or biblical foundations. Bradbury could have acknowledged, however, that in the Reformed theological context of Scotland, a systematic model of practical theology has existed in the universities based on the German progression through doctrine and ethics to practice, which is largely immune to the criticisms he levels at the English experiential

model. Scots practical theology was influenced by Schleiermacher's prescriptions for the new University of Berlin, indicating that not all parts of Britain were as isolated from continental developments as might be supposed.

Bradbury acknowledges that Liégé's prose style is dated but claims that his work still has a freshness about it. However, some readers might not be excited by his model of dogmatically rooted pastoring in a liberal ecclesial context. The theologians who are turned to in support—David Jenkins, John Robinson and Paul Tillich—represent the kind of broad liberal Protestantism that has already lost momentum, being outflanked by evangelical biblicism on one side and liturgical, liberal Anglo-Catholicism on the other. The one thing that these three all clearly lack is solid doctrinal foundations. The ultimate paradox of Liégé's project is, perhaps, his attempt to synthesize within a system an approach to theology that, being practical rather than theoretical, might in fact best be pursued practically. Today, practical theologians should focus on the phenomena of daily life—such as worship, work, food, clothing, gardening, or whatever people like to spend their time doing—and relate these to the Church's scripture, tradition and doctrine. In so doing, they may reach beyond systems and church boundaries to address people living in the secular world, showing how the theological may erupt in unexpected places.